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Why a Stalin flunkie smiled through his mustache at CIA

Recently, while rummaging through my files, I ran into what Saul Bellow, the renowned writer, wrote several years ago: "Lev Navrozov sees us, the Americans, as children at whom the Stalins smile through their mustachios."

That brought to mind a little fragment of history in which I happened to be involved.

Late in July, 35 years ago, I stood outside the ticket offices of the Tiraspol railway station in Moldavia, southwest of Russia, in a crowd of those who were hoping just like myself to buy tickets for a train bound for Moscow.

Suddenly a nondescript man approached and asked me if I needed tickets for Moscow. He led me into some drab office, barren except for a desk with a telephone and a bench in front of it.

Looking for spies

It was a KGB cell which every railroad station has. Seated at the desk was a KGB general from Moscow, in a gray civilian suit, while several subordinates of his milled around respectfully or brought in new detainees, whose identities were checked one by one. The area was "sealed," that is, the KGB blocked all exits. The KGB was looking for, yes, honest-to-goodness CIA spies.

What amazed me was the behavior of two of the detainees, who had neither property nor social status, and had recently been released from prison where they had served their term for "violation of labor laws." When one of them began to explain to the general who they were, the other said to his friend like a patrician would about the scum of the earth: "Why are you speaking with him?"

"These are people who are free," I thought with envy. They knew nothing about the KGB. What they saw in front of them were simply "chiefs," and they defied all

"chiefs," for they had nothing to lose except their chains," as Karl Marx said in 1848 about the "revolutionary proletariat."

Anyway, these two detainees were not CIA agents either, and after some threats ("Do you know to whom you refuse to speak?") the general bundled them out just like the rest of us. He had to check new detainees.

But a quarter of a century was to pass before I learned that I was a witness to one of those events which did indeed make the Stalins laugh through their mustachios.

No problem!

When the CIA was set up in 1947, it was assumed that it would riddle Russia with spies. Thus, the U.S. Air Force demanded that the CIA plant agents at every Soviet airport.

Actually, the chances of the CIA penetrating Russia and planting one agent at each Soviet airport are as great as those of an institution where few know their multiplication tables landing a man on the moon. But how could the CIA admit its inability?

Who admits his inability? A New York friend of mine runs courses on aggressiveness. To succeed you must be aggressive. Always say: "I can do it!" Never: "I can't do it." Always assume you're the best qualified for any job, and your wares are far superior to anyone else's.

The CIA was asked: Can you

riddle the Soviet infrastructure with agents? And the answer was: No problem!

So in 1949 CIA planes began flying into Russia, parachuting spies and coming back. That went on for almost four years, by which time the Soviet infrastructure must have been riddled with CIA agents.

No one's puzzled

Even today the CIA is not at all puzzled by one amazing detail. During World War II, Soviet anti-aircraft defenses were trained to down the best German aces flying the best fighter aircraft. Why, without any humanitarian scruples, Soviet anti-aircraft shot down any passenger plane which inadvertently strayed into Soviet airspace. However, all those CIA planes were never molested, but allowed to fly into Russia, drop spies and come back safely. For 4 years! How kind of Stalin. He must have loved CIA spies, after all.

The explanation is, alas, different. Soviet agent Kim Philby, who is now living in Moscow and who posed at that time as a linkman between British and American intelligence, informed Stalin's KGB as to when and where the CIA spies would be parachuted. He must have also given some descriptions of the poor spies because the KGB concentrated on certain definite suspects like myself. In any case, the KGB sealed off the indicated areas in advance, so the identities of all within them could be checked if necessary.

In other words, the CIA delivered its spies into eagerly waiting KGB hands. This is why a KGB general from Moscow came to the railroad station of a small Moldavian town. The scene is still before my eyes: the KGB general, his subordinates, the detainees.

But then I recall one of the Stalins, the Stalin of that time. Didn't he laugh through his mustachio at the CIA?

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